

I never saw the movie "Snakes on a plane". I think one day I will. I have a fear of snakes. Snakes belong in places where there are mosquitoes and leeches and sand that gets into your ears and teeth and so on. It is all very horrible. I cannot imagine how hard it would be to live in such a place indefinitely. Which is exactly where the Israelites found themselves. And they didn't like it either. All told they had quite lost the glow of Escaping Slavery and setting off on God's Great Wild Adventure into Freedom and a Land of Promise. The sales-pitch seemed not to match the servicing reality. How trustworthy is this God? How reliable is this Moses? Maybe we would be better off if we had never left home.

Often there is one thing that sums up, stands for, or represents all the irritation, the loss of faith, the grinding work and the lack of hope. For the Israelites it was the snakes. And the thing about snakes is that they kill you. The venom from the bite gets into you and slowly, or quickly, it kills you.

God knew that the venom from a snake gets in and kills you. God also knew that the grumbling, the doubting and the giving up on the vision was another venom that was killing the whole people. How could they be the People of God if they were always muttering on and wishing they were back in Egypt as slaves.

So when the snake bites got terrible, and a sense of panic was seizing the people, Moses told them to set up a huge statue of a snake. Whenever the snakes bit they should look at the snake and then the poison would not work.

In a way this was addressing the deeper poison of doubts and regrets and divisions being sown in the community. You deal with a snake-bite by acknowledging that you are bitten. You deal with regret and doubt and unhappiness by acknowledging that you are miserable. You name it. You say it. You talk about it openly. If there is something which is sucking the life out of you, you need to name it and deal with it. Don't run from the snake. Look at it and learn from it.

The Gospel of John says there is the same thing happening with Jesus. The cross gets raised up. We often forget that the cross is not a nice or pretty thing, but a device for brutal, drawn out execution. It stands for cruelty, abuse, racism, greed and power, disregard for another human being's worth and a desire to control others at any cost. While the Roman Empire's history is often seen as a great thing, it was also a poisoned, toxic and evil thing on the inside. It was all deeply corrupted with the vanity and greed of emperors.

So John says, look at the cross! Look at the evil! Look hard at the darkness that gathers there, like flies around the dying man. Learn what the Cross can teach you about yourself, your society, your work, your ways of dealing with people. Don't run from the Cross. Look at it and learn from it.

It was St Patrick's day yesterday. Apart from being a great fan of shamrocks and green beer, Patrick was a practitioner of this theology.

Patrick was kidnapped and enslaved. He was stripped of any human rights he may have had. He was denied family, language and freedom. His choices were blind obedience to his masters or brutal punishment, possibly death. He was living in the spiritual zone of snakes and crosses.

Now as it happened he actually managed to escape. He fled, got home, trained to be a priest, and then he said to his Bishop, "Send me as far away from those horrible Irish as you can!" No! Actually he said, "Send me to the people who enslaved me." He wanted to go back to the places of snakes and crosses. Perhaps it was because he had learned to look at being a slave, and learn what was at the heart of it. Perhaps he learned to look at the Cross of Jesus and learn what was at the heart of it. Slavery can only work where people have been taught to turn love off. You can only torture, brutalise or crucify where your ability to love has been turned off. For Patrick, to not love those who had not loved him would be to become like them. He had looked at the snake in their hearts and knew he did not want that. He had looked at the cross on which the Prince of Glory died and knew he wanted to live in the resurrection. But without facing the cross you do not get the resurrection. So Patrick set sail for Ireland, completely unarmed. He could easily have been enslaved again, and that was the risk. But Patrick was a man of faith.

The opposite of faith is not doubt, but despair.

It is the loss of hope, the giving in, the failure to still believe that the promise of abundant life can be fulfilled.

Patrick was a man of faith and hope and love, and the greatest of these was his love.

Quite what happened after he landed on Ireland's green and beery shores is uncertain. But his ability to turn a cruel and violent past into a vibrant and faithful church is the summary of the plot. The footnote is that all the snakes could no longer cope with his complete resistance to venom and/or evil, and swam off to look for other homes, and Ireland is snake-free to this day. Snake free, but there are enough crosses there for us to see the better reminder of what we are called to know deeply, and leave behind, turn away from and utterly transcend.

Snakes which poison are twined together to represent healing.

The Cross, a place of violence and death now represent to us eternal life.

Never fall for the pretty crosses alone, have crucifix as well. The path to the land of promise is through the snake-infested wilderness, and the way to life is by going into and through the sufferings you will surely meet. If you know the ways of the snake you will not die from them. If you recognize the way of evil, you will not let it take root in your soul, and you will come through to live in the dawn of resurrection.